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Rape and the Feminine Response in Early Modern England
and Several Shakespearean Works

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Senior English Honors Thesis

“Men are all but stomachs, and we all but food”

-Emilia, *Othello*, 3.4.100

With this utterance, Emilia captures the sentiment that most aptly describes the normal conceptions about gender relations in early modern England. In the case of this paper, the male consumption that she refers to turns out to be rape. Although rape is an outlying social action that is generally considered to be a breach to human decency, it has a grand historical and literary relevance. In fact, the great bard himself, William Shakespeare, refers to this act repeatedly throughout his literary canon. However, three individual texts seem to contain its greatest relevancy and pontification: “The Rape of Lucrece”, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Othello*. Each of these works contains a depiction of rape that is relatively close to conforming to the traditional conception.

Now, the word rape evokes a multitude of differing images and conceptions, but, for my purpose, I am focusing on rape as it is normally thought of. This is not to say that each scene I address contains a depiction of rape in the explicit physical sense; *Othello* contains accusations of rape under a false guise as well as a non-penetrative scene of marital rape. However, although these two scenes do not contain explicit physical transgression, they contain conceptions and ideas about rape which are just as fruitful in reading and investigation. In any case, in approaching these depictions, I hoped to find a common ground and purpose for their inclusion. As Susan Brownmiller states in her seminal modern work on the history of rape *Against Our Will*, “Only by investigating the historical existence of rape can we understand our current condition” (11). In doing so, it quickly becomes apparent that, when seeking causation for this rape within the play,

social pressures are the most likely culprit. Moreover, the social context in these works is of a correlating fashion to that of Shakespeare's contemporary climate in early modern England. Therefore, it is evident that there is some connection between the social meaning of rape within reality and the advent of rape within these plays. Moreover, the coincidence of both of these concepts speaks grandly to the general condition of the early modern feminine

In attempting to identify this connection, I found that several conceptual groupings of social contexts have the most relevance in matters of the feminine. The first is a correlation between male desire for the feminine and the patriarchal order of society in general. Within this heading fall concepts such as gender divisions and public exaltation of chastity. Adherence to these norms regresses the agency of females in both Shakespeare's contemporary society and his works as well as encourages volatile action for males. In each of these works, the violations of these standards culminates in a politicization of the defense of rape which actually reinforces these susceptible social positions. Early modern society transmitted these ideals to its constituents through marriage which Shakespeare also includes as motivating considerations in these rapes. Through these three modes, Shakespeare artfully transposes the pressures of his contemporary society into the worlds of his works in order to show the high propensity for feminine violation that is encouraged by his contemporary society.

The most important and encompassing conceptive context of rape that is addressed in this series of works is that of a larger correspondence between sexual desire of the female body and the typical patriarchal order. That is to say, in the early modern

climate and in these works, conventions about sexual consideration of females both support and reflect the value system that constructs the contemporary patriarchal system which pervades society. The influence that this context has when it comes to matters of feminine agency, and subsequently rape, lies in the almost comprehensively subordinate role that females are relegated to as compared to males in this traditional hierarchy.

In general, patriarchy finds its roots in the ancient human dichotomy of male and female. It is implicit in the notion of gender: a system of distinction must refer to a great enough number of differing attributes if it is to be necessary. And, as patriarchy is thoroughly entrenched in early modern England, the gender distinctions that materialize concurrently have a focus upon the male ideal and norm and those differences that render the female sex as a whole as something different and inferior. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford strongly encapsulate the nature of gender relations in the early modern England as they posit, “Man was the measure of all things, and the female was a deviation from the norm, the ‘other’” (18). Much of the contemporary sentiment regarding women and their relation to men is due to the classical theories of Aristotle that females are imperfect versions of males and, consequently, their subjugation is virtuous and justifiable.¹ Aristotle’s sort of thinking is notably influential in Thomas Laquer’s proposal of the one sex theory as being the norm in Europe at this time. His theory entails one physical sex for humans; the female gender exists as a departure from the male norm.² And, as these limited gender distinctions are necessarily related to the biological and reproductive differences between the two sexes, it is no wonder that matters of the

¹ Bar On, Bat Ami, “Engendering Origins: critical feminist readings of Plato and Aristotle”, pp. 6-8.

² Thomas Laquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from Greeks to Freud*, pp.29-34.

sexual become inextricable from the rest of the duty that the inferior position of the female owes to the male. Here is where considerations about Shakespeare's depicted rapes begin to encounter this correlation between sexual desire for the female and patriarchal order: the inferior position of the feminine ascribed by early modern gender distinctions subjects the raped women in each of this series of works to a helpless position wherein they can neither refrain from becoming the object of rape or resist its enactment.

In her book *Women in English Society 1500-1800*, Mary Prior identifies the updated conception of Aristotle's virtuous subjugation in early modern England. She proposes that the social division of labor implies differing ideals the two sexes; men should be "single-minded, thrusting, persistent, and indomitable" and women should be "adaptable, selfless, patient, and obedient" (96). These ideals are quite obviously set opposite to each other and thus create a tension in that exemplifying either one of them constitutes a possible violation of the other. Joan Cadden furthers this notion by making clear the link between the purposes associated with the physiological differences which necessitate terming women as irregular; the thrust and motility of male genitals and the receptive and passive nature of that of those female as correlating with social purposes³. Ignorant of the potential tensions, early modern society places great pressure on women to exemplify these kinds of attributes which are deemed worthwhile for their ability to both set women apart from men and to assist women in fulfilling their complementary roles. However, as previously stated, embracing this subordinate position can potentially exacerbate social regression rather than realizing the few benefits allowed to women in

³ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 178.

the traditional order of things. No character exemplifies the socially laudable characteristics of the early modern female more than Shakespeare's Lucrece and, appropriately, such attributes are centrally important in her vulnerable position in the social hierarchy which allows for her becoming an object of rape.

Although Tarquin is personally unacquainted with Lucrece, he is in fact a friend to Collatine and so presumable may be visiting Collatium on behalf of Lucrece's husband. Accordingly, and in compliance with the feminine ideal which she embodies, Lucrece welcomes Collatine to her dwelling with hospitality. Tarquin's first impressions of Lucrece upon their meeting further laud Lucrece's feminine splendor; "Well was he welcomed by the Roman dame, within whose face beauty and virtue strived which of them both should underprop her fame" (51-53). As this observation comes from not only a male, but a literal patriarch in waiting, it serves as strong evidence of Lucrece's adherence to convention insofar as she is fulfilling her duties as a female. The poem goes on to make clear that within Lucrece's hospitality lies no suspicion of ill intent because "unstained thoughts do seldom dream on evil. Birds never limed no secret bushes fear, so guiltless she securely gives good cheer / and reverent welcome to her princely guest" (87-90).

Lucrece's purity is given emphasis as justification for her unsuspecting nature, but the social pressure for her adherence to gender norms is influential as well. Lucrece is 'guiltless' because she is inclined to focus only upon the well being of others thereby epitomizing the selfless nature of the female sex. This is thoroughly evidenced by her emphatic concern for Collatine's honor in the wake of her rape. Moreover, Tarquin

embodies the opposing ideal of the male as a 'princely guest'. The only choice in action available to Lucrece that reinforces the social norm that women should be deferent and obedient is to forgo potential concern about the unity of her hearth and self and make all available bounty present to Tarquin as if he was kinsmen to Collatine.

In this particular interaction, Lucrece's agency is effectively removed. She is approached by a male of high standing within the patriarchal order and, conjoined with her fulfillment of the ascribed value and action of her opposing feminine niche, thereby has no real choice in the outcome of the situation. The correlation between the removal of Lucrece's agency in the face of social conventions and its removal in the act of her rape is strikingly apparent. Shakespeare depicts these imposed deficiencies in will as relevant to the events that unfold preceding Lucrece's rape in order to link the normal role of the female with the potentiality of extreme violation. By embracing the subservient position for the feminine that conventional gender divisions dictate, Lucrece further encourages the already implicit motivation for those who may to take advantage of the gender stereotypes held under the one sex theory. Shakespeare ascribes many of these same conventional qualities of feminine nature to Lavinia, the victim of rape in *Titus Andronicus*.

Lavinia is indicative of the lesser importance early modern society imposes upon women in and of herself in that, although her presence is integral to the ongoing central concerns of the play, she is bereaved of her capacity for speech relatively early and has a notably small number of lines up until that point. Shakespeare positions Lavinia as firmly entrenched in her adherence to the female standard as defined by the one sex model. Her

embodiment of this feminine ideal is set directly opposed to the character of Tamora, whose position as Queen and ruler as the manifestation of the Gothic tradition of more balanced gender standards stands as an ideological threat to Roman and early modern English conventions. Lavinia herself recognizes this opposition when she chastises Tamora for having “No grace, no womanhood” (2.3.182). Considering the challenge of the brevity of Lavinia’s speech in the play, Shakespeare succeeds thoroughly in highlighting her possession of the normal deferential qualities of this womanhood as they should exist in accordance with the complementary standards of the one sex system.

Lavinia’s first lines in the play are to the purpose of lauding her father Titus’s triumphs upon his return. Immediately, the division in traditional gender roles is apparent; Titus has accomplished the end of going forth to attain honor and victory for himself and his state in battle. As a patriarch and warrior, it is fitting that this end accentuates Titus’s masculine qualities of strength and persistence. Upon his return, Lavinia’s welcome suggests that her own positive attributes are complementary to Titus’s in a manner subserviently fitting for the dutiful daughter and woman. She embraces her father’s presence by entreating both he and fate with, “In peace and honour live Lord Titus long, / my noble lord and father, live in fame (1.1.157-158). Not only does Lavinia express her hope that Titus continues to embody male ideals in the extreme, but she twice refers to him as lord before she calls him father. In these same introductory lines, Lavinia explains her sadness by professing her purpose: “Lo, at this tomb my tributary tears / I render for my brethren’s obsequies” (1.1.159-160). Her choices in language highlight the integration of conventional gender considerations into the play. Titus and Lavinia’s

brothers are deserving of tribute because they have acted accordingly with their socially assigned duties and the implicit attributes which accompany them. Lavinia is exercising her own duties of patriarchal deference and selflessness by paying this tribute. This action also serves to emphasize Lavinia's possession of the appropriate feminine characteristics as they are conceived of as being directly complementary to those typical of a male.

Lavinia continues to supplement this notion throughout the remainder of her involvement with the play prior to the rape. Through her circumstantial promise of marriage to Saturninus, Shakespeare again depicts Lavinia as exalting masculine ideals as to effect of bolstering her own feminine position. She asserts Saturninus's justification in his preceding pardon of Tamora by claiming "true nobility / warrants these words in princely courtesy" (1.1.271-272). The honor and morality of Saturninus's decision strikes Lavinia as proper and in keeping with the duties of his position as the highest patriarch of her society. She again upholds the complementary and deferent position of women as dictated by that one sex model. Moreover, any protest to her conscription as empress is conspicuously absent from the reply to Saturninus. This is a noteworthy omission as the audience is soon informed of Lavinia's seemingly desired betrothal to Bassianus. That the betrothal suggests some previous claim to marriage for Bassianus makes no difference to Lavinia: adherence to her role as subservient female within the patriarchal order is paramount, and this necessitates assenting to the decision of marriage by both Titus and Saturninus. Saturninus supports the notion that there is no agency available to Lavinia in such matters when, after she is absconded with in the revolt, he refers to her as

a “changing piece” (1.1.306). That Lavinia offers no direct resistance to their marriage is irrelevant to Saturninus.

In light of contemporary ideas about gender, Shakespeare presents Lavinia’s fate as being inextricably tied with that of her male influences. Also, as representative of the socially held feminine ideal, she epitomizes those qualities of which it is constituted. These qualities of obedience and deference are the adherents between her condition and the male stewards which guide its state. It is quite obvious that no violation of this adherence will be initiated by Lavinia, and, as such, she is only available in a romantic sense to those men who deserve the complement of her femininity. This premise figures prominently into the reasoning of Aaron and the brothers who rape her. Chiron and Demetrius originally intend to vie for Lavinia’s favor in more traditional ways. Chiron says to Demetrius, “I am as able and as fit as thou to serve, / and to deserve my mistress’ grace” and indicates a desire to, “plead my passions for Lavinia’s love” (2.1.34, 36).

However, Aaron chastises them for ignoring the traditions of Rome when it comes to such matters. His proffered solution is for the pair to isolate Lavinia in the forest and “strike her home by force, if not by words” (2.1.119). That the outsiders find their only method of recourse in desire for Lavinia to be in rape shows the drastic regression gender dichotomy implies for the feminine position. Shakespeare’s contemporary approach of the one sex model suggests duties and attributes for women which remove agency of action especially with respect to male influence. As Lavinia demonstrates this same lack of agency, she is doomed to the restriction of an objective position for her sexual competitors and thus, her attainment is treated with inhuman

calculation by the Goths. As with Lucrece, Lavinia's embodiment of the feminine ideal directly leads to a regressed position in breadth of her will and, as such, she is defenseless to the terrible subjection of rape which acts on those same principles.

In the previous scenes considered, conventional societal conceptions of gender restrict the wills of both Lucrece and Lavinia to the point of stagnation. This trend is challenged by differing circumstances for Desdemona, the object of rape in the tragedy *Othello*. As is the case with the female characters from both other plays, Desdemona is presented as exceptional in possessing those characteristics which are conventionally associated with proper femininity. Brabantio describes her as "a maid so tender, fair, and happy" (1.2.67). He later contends Desdemona is "A maiden never bold, / of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / blushed at herself" while suggesting some inconsistency in Othello's methods of courtship (1.3.94-95). As the patriarch of the family, it is in Brabantio's interest to be knowledgeable of Desdemona's feminine tranquility and vigor so as to be assured of the sustenance of their co-dependent gender hierarchy. Further evidence which suggests Desdemona's feminine value is of a similar form as Lucrece and Lavinia is that, like them, she is romantically desired by several characters rather than just one. However, this consensus in her perfection does not subsist throughout the entire play.

Following the revelations about the real origins of her marriage with Othello, Desdemona is ridiculed for her inconstancy and deception, two characteristics which are opposed to those of the contemporary ideal for women. Brabantio advises Othello to "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee"

(1.3.291-292). As Roderigo laments his unrequited love for Desdemona, Iago offers comfort in his professed belief that “It cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her love to the Moor... It was a violent commencement in her, and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration” (1.3.335-338). Although the traditional conception of the proper female traits holds women to be reserved and committal, there is also a contemporary social notion of women as deceptive and lustful. Although these notions seem to conflict, the latter is actually a response to any lack of conform to the further. Christine Peters contends that in early modern England, “the great lustfulness of women, together with the uncertainty of paternity, supported the idea of woman as temptress and deceiver and seemed to justify the double standard” (71).

In *Othello*, this double standard lies in the monumental value placed in Desdemona’s feminine worth set against the faithlessness that her male counterparts come to expect from her. That no stock is placed in her constancy implies a broader spectrum of agency for Desdemona as compared to Lucrece and Lavinia; she can act freely towards males whereas their actions are determined by convention. However, this more realized will does not actually free Desdemona from the fate of positional restriction when it comes to typical gender conceptions. The characters who criticize Desdemona’s constancy still present her alternative actions as symbiotic partnerships with men in which she fulfills the secondary feminine role. Iago suggests that Desdemona will treacherously abandon the Moor but only to the end of fulfilling her love for Cassio naturally, or, by Iago’s ploys, with Roderigo. The true limit to potential in ends for Desdemona is encapsulated by the answer to Brabantio’s question of “Do you perceive

in all this noble company / where most you owe obedience?" (1.3.178-179). Desdemona identifies her duty to both Othello and her father as they are both patriarchal influences on her. Accordingly, she is chastised by those patriarchal figures that are scorned by her selection of Othello. However, the more expansive will she shows as compared to that held by the conventional female only serves to highlight the depth of the gender hierarchy in both Venice and contemporary Shakespearian society. Even as Desdemona breaks free from the foundational level of her gender restrictions, she finds reproach from characters to whose patriarchal position her action poses challenge as well as still being constrained to the same certain relationships by the tenants of conventional ideas about gender. She remains drastically subordinate to Othello in their marriage, and this, coupled with the concerns of inconstancy her exercise in agency has assisted in festering within Othello's mind creates the substratum for his rape. Further reinforced by the mask of negative rhetoric and the challenge of feminine will, the gender division of the one sex model fosters an inevitable position of subordination for the feminine which lends itself suitably to being objectified through rape.

Thus far I have discussed the attributes set forth by contemporary gender conventions as referring to the one sex model and how female assent to these norms reinforces the objective and passive condition of the feminine in general. In this series of works, this sort of reduction is encouraging to a similar re-iteration of male ideals which both support the power dynamic of the rapes depicted within. However, there is another attribute of a special case that is even more telling of the relation between sexual discourse and the typical hierarchal order. This attribute is chastity and its special

considerations lies in that, unlike such qualities as obedience and deference, one violation of the standards of virginity is an eternal condemnation for a woman as far as social regard is concerned. As it is viewed in early modern society, chastity also incorporates the tenants of all other feminine virtues as necessary precursors to its existence. In her essay entitled “Effacing Rape in Early Modern Representation”, Barbara Baines asserts that, “Virginity, signified by the hymen, is ‘a member’ that literally ‘embodies’ chastity, thus rendering a moral virtue visible in the body and thereby defining the value of the woman” (71). As it were, sustained chastity is an indicator of a woman’s quality in general; if she retains it, she is likely to be a woman of equal purity in all other areas.

Baines also speaks of the condition of chastity as being centrally linked to female worth. As previously shown through consideration of gender conventions, as an attribute of unequalled value, preservation of chastity is paramount for both the male perspective which dictates it is so as well as the for the female if she is to be held of any social accord. Adherence to the feminine norm is nourishing to the fruit of which early modern men hope to reap of women. The inherent inequalities of using virginity as the standard for female value are on flourishing display throughout the legal discourse on rape of Bracton, a prominent and comprehensive early modern legal authority. Bracton first places emphasis on chastity by separating his discourse on rape from the on the rape of virgins, as he terms it. Among other appeals there is an appeal called the rape of virgins. I extract certain portions of Bracton’s legal rhetoric which are indicative of the social considerations of chastity in the early modern period:

“The rape of virgins is a crime imputed by a woman to the man by whom she says she has been forcibly ravished against the king's peace. If he is convicted of this crime punishment follows: the loss of members, that there be member for member, for when a virgin is defiled she loses her member and therefore let her defiler by punished in the parts in which he offended... Punishment of this kind does not follow in the case of every woman, though she is forcibly ravished, but some other severe punishment does follow, according as she is married or a widow living a respectable life, a nun or a matron, a recognized concubine or a prostitute plying her trade without discrimination of person.”⁴

That Bracton presumes the loss of virginity to equate with the loss of the female member shows just how vital intact virginity is in upholding the feminine ideal. No proper sexual activity is available to a woman who has lost her virginity in rape. Bracton goes on to qualify the corresponding punishments for rapists in terms of the kind and quality of female involved. Obviously, in this way of things, women of low socio-sexual standing will demand less severe punishment than a maid of assured chastity. The ways in which Bracton conceives of the legality of rape further heighten the social value of preserved chastity for both men and women, as well as positioning its value far in excess of any other personal or social consideration. The influences of societal ideas about chastity are thoroughly incorporated in this series of Shakespearean works. The social pressure of maintaining chastity as the embodiment of virtue and purity figures greatly into the rapes of each of the three women.

⁴ Samuel Thorne, *Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England*, 376-384.

One of the more glaring aspects of chastity addressed in “The Rape of Lucrece” is its value as a subjective male measure of feminine worth. The opening lines of the poem find Tarquin stealing from the Roman camp towards Collatium, the home of “Lucrece the chaste” (7). This primary naming of Lucrece highlights her possession of virginity as her all defining quality. Normally, names which include the construction of ‘the adjective’ indicate some kind of exceptional display of unique aspect or ability of worth. This construction is applied to Lucrece, but the adjective of chaste is one intended in the early modern period to describe all women of good social standing. Such a description further highlights the points of Baines and Bracton that chastity is nearly exhaustive in the definition of female value. Shakespeare recognizes the potential of corruption in the equality of virginity and female worth when he begins the second stanza with, “Haply that name of chaste unhapp’ly set / this bateless edge on his keen appetite” (8-9). Chastity is a profitable and good possession for women and their society but, when its purity is disregarded in men’s desire, then a corruption of chastity’s value takes place wherein, rather than lauding the sacred nature of virginity, man is inclined to instead extract its singular value for himself.

Shakespeare does not present the considering of virginity in this way to exclusively belong to men whose ends are skewed by lust. Tarquin’s knowledge about Lucrece’s chastity is gained through listening to Collatine verbalize his pride in having such an ideal female for a wife. The poem condemns Collatine as unwise in explicating the origins of his happiness which further accentuates the value in chastity from the male perspective. The poem conceptualizes the exchange of knowledge in terms of revealing

secret wealth; “For he the night before in Tarquin’s tent / unlocked the treasure of his happy state, / what priceless wealth the heavens had him lent” (15-17). In terms of the poem, there is a valuable prize that Collatine owns whose location has been revealed. Although Lucrece’s physical beauty is a motivation in Tarquin’s actions, the most valuable treasure he may elicit through his rape is Lucrece’s chastity.

The tension of the nature of chastity for women in general is made clear through this conversation between high order males. Chastity is an attribute which is comprehensively defining for women in a social sense. As such, women who desire social acceptance and form are expected to foster their chastity without falter. However, by nature, chastity is a possession to be vied for by men. Its preservation is given paramount importance because its benefits are intended to eventually be enjoyed by a man. This notion is captured through the social construct of stages of the life cycle in a typical early modern conception. In *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720*, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford write, “Three stereotypes apparently encompassed all female life: maid, wife, and widow” (66). Each of these concepts implies some relation to a male, but they also each carry some notion of the sexual which can be related to chastity. A maid has then end of preserving her chastity until she becomes a wife at which point, as a possession of hers, it is subsumed into the realm of her husband. By these means, chastity is both a possession of the female and a trophy of sorts to be vied for by males. This way of competitive struggle is the fray into which Tarquin enters when Collatine boasts of Lucrece’s value.

It is no lengthy stretch between the relevance of Lucrece's chastity as an end to be strived for to her objectified role as the aim of Tarquin's lust. For this reason, Shakespeare presents Tarquin's desires as a siege upon her marriage. In quantifying the wrongs he has done to Collatine, Tarquin refers to his own presence in Collatinum as, "This siege that hath engirt his marriage, this blur to youth, this sorrow to the sage" (221-222). That the poem begins with Tarquin and Collatine's involvement with a siege highlights the forceful nature of this new siege that has been laid to Lucrece and her marriage. Lucrece's chastity is as a valuable fruit held within the defenses of a city, and Tarquin's intentions are to breach her wall to the end of attaining her fruit. The masculine endeavor of war highlights the conflicting condition of chastity in early modern society as owned by both genders. In the face of this tension, Lucrece is further reduced in her ability to transcend an objectified role, and Tarquin's morale in raping her is strengthened.

As chastity is the singular measure of Lucrece's feminine splendor, its removal through Tarquin's rape comes as a personally destabilizing shock to Lucrece. The first lines of the poem following the rape say of Lucrece, "But she hath lost a dearer thing than life" (687). As previously suggested, for a woman who emphasizes her social standing, unmarred chastity exceeds all other values in total. It seems preposterous that such a specific consideration can outweigh all other measures of personal worth, but this outrage is indicative of the place of chastity in the correspondence between sexual desire and patriarchal order for women. In the early modern social order, a woman being sexually pure is a paramount value because through its maintenance, she is most able to fulfill the

subservient and correlated role of the feminine in regard to the masculine. Once Lucrece is bereft of this value, she has lost all faith in her fulfillment of her position as it stands with respect to Collatine. The concerns that she delineates regarding the rape as violating his honor and personage are encompassing of the pressures that upholding the feminine social standard of chastity connote for women themselves.

Lucrece laments that the rape will be revealed as her transgression once time has made others aware of its occurrence. She entreats the night, “Make me not object to the tell-tale day: The light will show charactered in my brow the story of sweet chastity’s decay, the impious breach of holy wedlock vow” (806-809). Again, the most primary concern in public knowledge of the rape is the loss of ‘sweet chastity’. What had previously rendered Lucrece idealized by men and her society is instantly removed. That rape effects the destruction of her reality acts as further delineation for the limited and precarious cleft on which the feminine may prosper in early modern society. Lucrece goes on to suggest that her wedding vow to Collatine has been breached, even though she was only forcibly complicit in the action of the rape. Lucrece is indicating a belief in that she had at least partial agency in the establishment of marriage and its subsequent expectations and that any breach of these expectations involves the same exercise of will and so, deserves appropriate guilt. That she vigorously resisted Tarquin’s advances is irrelevant, even in her own mind. Preservation of chastity has cardinal emphasis in the role of women within the patriarchal order, and so, violations against it are equally powerful in their condemnation of female adherence to that principle.

Lucrece shows further awareness of this fact as she worries of the damage this action will do to Collatine's personage, as their union make their ends complicit. She entreats opportunity to, "Let my good name, that senseless reputation, For Collatine's dear love be kept unspotted" (820-821). She even justifies her passivity during the rape with the defense it made of Collatine's honor as Tarquin threatened her non-compliance with a staged scene of impious action on her part. That the devaluing of her chastity seems to equate with a similar reduction in the dignity of Collatine shows precisely the aims of exalting chastity as the greatest of feminine attributes: Its worth lies solely in its eventual and singular possession by a husband. Lucrece's most primary goal and merit in life is the preservation of her chastity but only as an end in relation to a man.

Contemporary conventions about chastity and its importance compel women who would adhere to them to conceive of their own value as determine by the direct masculine expectations of the feminine. Lucrece's focus on preserving the honor of Collatine through chastity strengthens her objectified role within the patriarchal order which leads, not only to the welcoming of Tarquin's presence, but also to lack of resistance to the rape.

Following the rape, concerns of tainted chastity as a male loss also motivate Lucrece's famous suicide. She conceives of a number of injustices that her death would prevent for Collatine, many of them involving the shaming advantage her persistence in life would create for Tarquin. She proclaims, "Nor shall he smile at thee in secret thought, nor laugh with his companions at thy state" (1065-1066). Lucrece's concerns about Collatine's honor exceed the general to the point of deploring the homosocial

disadvantage that Tarquin's rape would create between them should she survive as the marker of Collatine's shame. Indeed, the justification of exalting chastity to such an extreme lies exclusively in the preservation of male integrity. Lucrece looks through the external considerations about her chasteness to this central axiom and finds her violation of it to be so severe that suicide is the only appropriate recourse. The early modern emphasis on chastity both encourages male conquest and forces the sustenance of female propriety to be conceived of through men. Both of these consequences are directly supportive of the hierarchical order and heighten the social potentiality for rape.

In none of these works is the relation between social conventions about chastity and the actual depiction of rape more present than in *Titus Andronicus*. In fact, the events of the forest that immediately surround the actual depiction rape force the characters of Tamora and Lavinia along with their respective confederates into a representative discourse of sorts concerning the proper feminine attitude about chastity. As previously suggested, the condition of chastity is indicative of the feminine nature of a woman as a whole and vice versa. Accordingly, the depicted modes of chastity for Tamora and Lavinia are diametrically opposed in the same fashion as are their other feminine qualities. Coupled with the familial offense that Tamora and Aaron's tryst levies against Bassianus's family, the entrenchment of Bassianus and Lavinia in the socially conventional camp regarding gender roles leads to their aggressive castigation of Tamora's sexual promiscuity. Lavinia's criticism is particularly and appropriately harsh: "Tis thought you have a goodly gift in horning, / and to be doubted that your Moor and you / are singled forth to try experiments. / Jove shield your husband from his hounds

today” (2.3.67-69). Lavinia conceives of the sexual nature of Tamora as transgressive specifically because of the offense it carries against the patriarchal propriety of things. Rather than suggesting that sexual promiscuity is a blemish on Tamora’s personal honor, Lavinia insightfully identifies the justification for the emphasis in value that early modern society places on chastity as the maintenance it provides for the husband’s honor. However, in doing so, she is reasserting her role in the patriarchal hierarchy and isolating her own value as that chastity which Tamora lacks.

As with Lucrece, this isolated value is the stated end of the rapists of Lavinia. Tamora’s first inclination is to kill Lavinia but Demetrius waylays this action by saying, “Stay, madam, here is more belongs to her. / First thresh the corn, then after burn the straw. / This minion stood upon her chastity, / upon her nuptial vow, her loyalty” (2.3.122-124). Through trading her trading of barbs with Tamora as a way of distancing her own feminine quality, Lavinia has unwittingly provided the Goths with knowledge of the possession which she most fears to lose. Demetrius likens Lavinia to the harvest of a conquered people, the value of whose crops may be gleaned before utter destruction. The produce that the brothers intend to reap from Lavinia’s crop is her chastity both because of its inherent value and its foundational position in the Roman patriarchal hierarchy. In pleading for mercy, Lavinia fortifies the ethic of their plan when she asks of Tamora, “And with thine own hands kill me in this place; / for ‘tis not life that I have begged so long; / poor I was slain when Bassianus died” (2.3.169-171). As with Lucrece, life is forfeit in the face of tarnished chastity. Sexual purity is again depicted as the most encompassing aspect in determining female value. That Lavinia is the embodiment of a

chaste woman serves to set apart her constancy as the singular, concise source of her worth and desirability. Moreover, her criticisms of Tamora show that she endorses her own value through possession of the same ideals of which Tamora is insufficient. This self-imposed reduction in what constitutes feminine value allows for Chrion and Demetrius to satiate their physical desire and, at the same time, act as agents of revenge for Aaron and Tamora by destructing the constituents of the patriarchal Roman society which they so hate. Shakespeare inscribes contemporary assumptions as to the importance and function of chastity in constructing the feminine in *Titus Andronicus* to the effect of reducing Lavinia's character to an objective sexual goal as evidenced by the verbalized intentions of her rapists. Adherence to the tenants of the customary early modern niche including the idolization of chastity continues to be a formative influence in establishing a social interdependence for women that is susceptible and even encouraging to rape.

To this point, Shakespeare allows for Lavinia's surviving patriarchal stewards to verbalize their sentiments concerning her stained purity follow the rape. As Marcus is the first of the Andronici to encounter Lavinia after her ravishment, he has the unfortunate duty of first ascertaining her fate. Marcus needs only a few lines of considering Lavinia's physical state before concluding, "But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee" (2.4.26). This seemingly extreme supposition shows Marcus's recognition of the value in Lavinia's chastity and the temptation that this value creates for men in her society. He continues to be in the position of making apriori statements about Lavinia by being the one to introduce her condition to Titus. The brevity of his statement only heightens its

power and complexity: “This was thy daughter” (3.1.62). On the one hand, the statement connotes the horror that would be found in the sheer physical disparity between Lavinia’s whole state and the one she exists in now. However, Marcus’s use of the past tense also hearkens to the notion of chastity as being utterly defining for women. In light of the sexual transgressions against her, Lavinia is no longer the same person.

As Lavinia’s father and most loving relation, Titus is ideal for voicing his perspective on the condition of her violated chastity. His disposition comes out most clearly just prior to his execution of revenge on Chrion and Demetrius. He tells them, “Here stands the spring whom you have stained with mud, / this goodly summer with your winter mixed” (5.2.169-170). Titus invokes images pollution as a means of noting the immaculacy Lavinia had previously held which now no longer exists. Like Lucrece, Lavinia’s complicity is irrelevant to a loss of purity; chastity violated is chastity lost. Titus goes on to precisely set the ordering of Lavinia’s losses as he sees them. In delineating the consequences of the brothers’ transgressions, he measures Lavinia’s losses as, “Both her sweet hands, her tongue, and that more dear / than hands or tongue, her spotless chastity” (5.2.174-176). The loss of Lavinia’s chastity stands supreme in significance even over her loss of the ability to speak.

Of all the morose events which have unfolded thus far in the play, Titus positions this offense as the most inhuman. Accordingly, and in the spirit of appropriate revenge, Titus murders the brothers as their ravishing of Lavinia has effectively killed her. He verbalizes this equation when, in response to Tamora’s inquiry of his reason for killing Lavinia, Titus claims, “Not I, ‘twas Chrion and Demetrius. / They ravished her, and cut

away her tongue, / and they, 'twas they, that did her all this wrong" (5.3.55-57). It is no wonder he thinks a woman who loses her chastity to be dead considering the correlative sexual purpose of women in his patriarchal world. Part of Bracton's legal conception of rape is that "when a virgin is defiled she loses her member"; no member means no sexual or reproductive worth (349). The lines spoken by Marcus and Titus regarding Lavinia's bereft condition show just how prominently their society values chastity. They both equate her loss in purity with a loss of all meaningful life; indeed, this notion spurs Titus to destroy her. As with the lamentations of Lucrece prior to her suicide, the commentary of Lavinia's surrounding patriarchs shows just how deconstructing rape is to her value in chastity as well as to that of contemporary Shakespearean opinion.

Social aggrandizement of chastity is even more central to the circumstances surrounding Desdemona's rape because, unlike Lucrece and Lavinia, she is not comprehensively held to be chaste prior to her rape. To begin, there is the matter of Brabantio's issue with her marriage. He does not make as expansive and specific of an apostrophe involving the tragedy of tarnished chastity as Lucrece or Titus, but Shakespeare inscribes the conventional heightening of its value in more subtle manners throughout Brabantio and other accusers' lines. Iago's plan is to manipulate Brabantio's initial opinion of his daughter's marriage, and he does so by charging Roderigo to, "Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight" (1.1.68). Brabantio's delight is, to his knowledge, a chaste and obedient daughter and thus this idea of poisoning hearkens to the mud which clouded Lavinia's spring of chastity. Upon discovering his daughter's absence from home, Brabantio exclaims, "It is too true an evil. Gone she is, / and what's

to come of my despised time / is naught but bitterness” (1.2.161-162). These lines depict Brabantio mourning over the incompleteness of some life long duty, namely the preservation of Desdemona’s chastity. In accordance with the conventions of early modern England, Brabantio recognizes the necessary male ownership of a female’s chastity at all times. Up until the time of her marriage, Desdemona’s chastity is at least partially owned by him.

This notion is what motivates Brabantio’s behest of the council to investigate the origins of their marriage. As the steward of Desdemona’s chastity, it is his responsibility to be assured that, when its ownership is transferred, that it is to a husband that will nurture it properly in the sense of its function within the patriarchal hierarchy. Brabantio’s own personal biases against Othello as well as Iago’s manipulations of his opinion are portions of what renders Othello lacking in the father’s eyes, but that the change in Desdemona’s chastity occurs without his knowledge is further support in decrying her choice in a husband. Brabantio deflects blame from his lack of involvement by accusing Othello of the utilization of magic in subduing Desdemona’s will. He claims to the council of Desdemona that, “She is abused, stol’n from me, and corrupted / by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks” (1.1.60-61). His first line repeatedly notes images of spoiled purity, but he also includes imagery of dispossession which implies a link between the two. That Othello would marry his daughter and claim her chastity as his own without any prior knowledge or influence for Brabantio is, to him, a great affront. As had been seen before, he has isolated his daughter’s value within the conventional order as her chastity by assuming this male duty of protection for the trait

and its sustenance up until the point of proper social transfer. In Brabantio's mind, this notion has been violated by Othello's "drugs or minerals that weakens motion" in the form of a rape. Othello has violated Desdemona's chastity from the perspective which lauds its value as his claim to it has circumnavigated the previous owner, as with Collatine and Bassianus before. The conception of chastity as the comprehensive and most important attribute in establishing feminine again leads to favorable conditions for rape as the isolated value it creates confers specific cause to the rapist and complete vulnerability to the rapee.

Othello's claim to Desdemona's chastity serves this supportive role for Brabantio in his hopes of rape, but it becomes the issue of single importance in fashioning the relationship between the couple which culminates in Othello's actual rape and murder. Barbara Baines argues that the intact hymen is the physical manifestation of feminine virtue.⁵ As Othello begins to suspect Desdemona of the deception that Brabantio predicted she would enact against him, he becomes nearly obsessed with determining her virtue and chastity through some single consideration such as this. Therefore, Othello begins to harangue Desdemona about the whereabouts of the handkerchief he had previously gifted her. Not only does Othello claim its having a mystical nature wherein only by the continuing possession of the handkerchief can women preserve their marriages, but he goes on to say of its embroidery that, "The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk, and it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful / conserved of maidens' hearts" (71-73). The handkerchief becomes synonymous with Desdemona's willing possession of chastity; the sacred nature of its upholding is reiterated in the holiness of

⁵ Baines, "Effacing Rape in Early Modern Representation", 71

the worms that made the silk of which it was fashioned, and indeed, the strawberry embroidering is dyed with the blood of virgins. Her loss of this token enrages Othello. To exacerbate his doubt of her sustained chastity, Cassio enters with possession of the handkerchief through Iago's premeditation as the culmination of its deceptive effect upon Othello. These are the last actions of Desdemona in the series of motivations which commit Othello to her murder. Shakespeare's mirroring of his contemporary patriarchal sentiment, which reduces feminine value to equivalent with status of chastity, in the social fabric of the play dictates the short sided approach that Othello takes in adjudicating upon Desdemona's constancy as well as the fruitlessness in recourse available in response. As it has throughout these works, chastity's lauded position within early modern context appears through the function of eventually forcing both parties into the action rape.

Although doubts in Desdemona's chastity have brought Othello to the brink of her murder, he exhibits inner struggle as to the exact fate such transgression should demand. Chastity is clearly his primary motivation to this point; He begins the last scene of the play by bemoaning unto himself that, "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul" (5.2.3). He solidifies that this cause is Desdemona's unfaithfulness as he next appeals to the "chaste stars" for a contrasting good to Desdemona's offence. However, the antecedent of this cause, which is presumably his passionate murder of Desdemona, actually seems to be a greater justice to which Othello is bound. He expresses an unwillingness to harm a woman in which he still finds value and desire by leaving her "whiter skin of hers than

snow” unmarred. The thought which sets him irrevocably to her murder is that should she live on, she will deceive more men in the same way she has him (5.1.4,6).

Rather than destroying the patriarchal order as Tarquin and the Gothic brothers have done, Othello instead must murder Desdemona to preserve it and its sacred place of chastity. Othello himself verbalizes the association between his murder and rape. Along with his current assessment of Desdemona’s physicality as pure, he laments that, “When I have plucked thy rose / I cannot give it vital growth again. / It needs must wither” (5.2.13-15). He also continues his conceptualization of Desdemona as a light by suggesting his action will render her heat permanently quenched. These kinds of metaphors speak to his actions as synonymous with rape as Desdemona really does possess unblemished chastity which he will permanently revoke. However, that these events are carried out in the name of justice positions his rape as reinforcing chastity’s proper role in society. Nevertheless, this fact does not alter the concerns of feminine purity which surround the rape.

The similarities in motivation that Shakespeare’s contemporary social beliefs about chastity have in delineating the terms of rape these three works are striking. Chastity is held in such high esteem socially because of its relation to males as well as that relation’s purpose in the larger patriarchal order. However, as evidenced in the rapes of these plays, its nature as such is both restrictive to the value, and subsequent agency that early modern women hold for themselves as well as to the value that men of the same society create for them. The typical construction of rape as a forceful, self-interested male taking advantage of a passive and helpless female coincides directly with

the socio-sexual hierarchy that the early modern assumptions about chastity create. For this reason, it is a viable circumstance through which to address the contemporary feminine condition and its restrictive correspondence to the patriarchal order for Shakespeare.

To this point, I have considered these works through the context of the general place, purpose, and end for women in typical early modern thinking as it pertains to the depictions of rape and their relevant scenes from these texts. However, these social considerations do not merely exist in these works to the purpose of being directly influential to their characters; a larger social synthesis of concerns about rape also occurs in common in the form of a legal reaction to and subsequent politicization of rape. These political resolutions suggest a consensual perspective on the proper methodology of dealing with rape and so are extremely telling in that they distill out the importance that the societies of these texts find in such action. In each work, the politicization of rape in its prosecution only serves to reinforce the preexisting social standards which have a major hand in cultivating its propensity of occurrence rather than offering the renewed defense to the female genders which is its implicit goal.

In the final stanzas of “The Rape of Lucrece” following Lucrece’s suicide, Brutus entreats Collatine and Lucretius to control their paralyzing woe and, in turn, join him in a pledge for revenge. Brutus displays a thoughtful strategy in invigorating the pair by inciting their domestic pride as a cause for action. In arguing against suicide to Collatine, Brutus repeatedly incites their empirical state and duty calling Collatine a “courageous Roman” as well as positioning Collatine’s task as “To rouse our Roman gods with

invocations that they will suffer these abominations- since Rome herself in them doth stand disgraced” (1828, 31-33). However, the proposed revenge of the Brutus has the stated antecedent of Tarquin’s offence rather than an emphasis on the violations against Lucrece. Indeed, Brutus terms Lucrece’s confessions as “wrongs” (1840). The trio even goes so far as to publicly display Lucrece’s body in Rome to the purpose of gathering volition for the negative sentiment towards Tarquin. These actions culminate in Rome’s perpetual Banishment of Tarquin but the only mention made of remedy for Lucrece as a result of these actions is with qualified focus on her social obligations which have been destructed by the rape. In exacting the revenge she commissioned through framing her rape as a political offense, Lucrece’s supposed champions only strengthen her position as a doomed objective end for men within her contemporary political spectrum. They reduce her ravished body to a mere symbol of a male’s social violations and intend only to rectify the offenses posed against “chaste Lucrece’ soul” and “the death of this true wife” (1839, 41).

However, in this poem, the most notable piece of textual evidence as support of the regressed feminine position imposed by the politicization of rape is voiced directly by Shakespeare. As “The Rape of Lucrece” begins in media res, he chooses to preempt the poem with a shot plot summary entitled “The Argument”. For the most part, this explanatory introduction mirrors events exactly as they are depicted in the poem, but it concludes with a detail that deviates from this pattern. In addition to the exile of Tarquin for the rape of Lucrece, the Argument states that his relations are all expelled from Rome as well a philosophical shift in high government from kingship to consulate. These added

details point to an awareness on Shakespeare's behalf of the inadequacy in sexual norms which is as large of a culprit in the rape as Tarquin's inherent deviancy. By depicting the banishment of the entire patriarchal web from which Tarquin is spawned as well as a reduction in the power of the conventional patriarchal symbol in government, Shakespeare increases the fault placed on social conventions for Lucrece's rape in a way that the tradition of the poem does not.

Lavinia's rape is politicized through the defense of revenge taken upon her offenders much in the same way as Lucrece's is. The play concludes with a political address to an assembly of Romans immediately followings the death's that occur during Titus' fateful dinner. During this series of speeches, a nameless lord suggests that Rome has been unacceptably self-destructive. He entreats Lucius to inform those assembled about the events which have demanded such a condemnation in the way that Aeneas told Dido of "The story of that baleful-burning night / When subtle Greeks surprised King Priam's Troy" (5.3.82-83). The lord compares the Gothic agitators to this most classic covert invasion as a way to call attention to the deliberate agency exercised by Roman authorities in not only allowing this force into Roman midst, but fostering its growth as well. This comparison implies that there is some responsibility for this civil unrest including Lavinia's rape to be attributed to social structure instead of being levied in total against the characters of the actors involved. However, Lucius does not pursue this path in his response to the lord; he and Marcus cite only Chrion, Demetrius, and Tamora as the causes of disturbance. In addition, this last scene in general presents Lucius and his individual merit as the salve for the Roman wounds. Again, Shakespeare includes

mention of the potential for systematic readjustment in the face of rape, but, in the case of Lavinia, the politicization of rape ends up ignoring foundational causes for rape steeped in gender conventions and, instead, reinforces the system that advances them.

There is no more clear endorsement of the patriarchal system through politicization of rape than by Brabazio in *Othello*. His accusations of rape are tinged with the political from the outset as Brabantio seeks their retribution through arbitration by Venice's senate. In response to a profession of the Duke's preclusion from addressing Brabantio's concerns, he exclaims, "Bring him away. / Mine's not an idle cause. The Duke himself, / or any of my brothers of the state, / cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own; / for if such actions may have passage free, / bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be" (1.2.95-100). Brabantio insinuates that the rape of a daughter is a great atrocity, and more importantly, a political challenge against Brabantio's landed position and all others of its kind, and thus, should be appropriately considered by all men of standing. This politicization of the potential rape of Desdemona completely forgoes any sort of inclusion of the social media within which it takes place and, instead, blindly advocates a simplistic conception of its workings so as to sustain the normal parameters of patriarchal society. It is no surprise that in *Othello*, as in both of the other works considered, when male characters politicize rape to the end of condemning its evil, they actually heighten its propensity for occurrence by deliberately strengthening the conventional inequality in gender standards which encourages circumstances conducive to rape.

The politicization of rape that occurs in the preceding scenes of discussion is, as mentioned, representative of the social contexts concerning gender which are so influential in its occurrence within these works. The assertion of any such political philosophy is only useful insofar as the extent of its practical application. That is to say, for proponents of the patriarchal norm to have their ideological beliefs concerning gender and its proper involvement with the workings of society enacted, there must be some outlet through which to impart ideals unto the members of that society. When considering matters of gender and sexual convention in the early modern period, the most glaringly notable outlet of this kind is marriage. Marriage, taken in turn with its contemporary expectations of reproduction and ordered cohesion, is the foundational practical outlet for the enactment of the typical belief about gender roles. After all, it is a social ordering based around the procreative capabilities of its parties.

As Susan Amussen asserts in her book *An Ordered Society*, family is the basic unit for political and social order in early modern England (1). This being the case, the social contexts already mentioned are markedly influential in the conceptual formation of a proper marriage in the early modern period. However, the social context of marriage has unique a relevance to rape in this series of works. Early modern marriage is shaped by an extensive grouping of conventions which, as expected, are typically regressive to the agency of the females involved in them, especially with respect to matters of sexual consideration. As with the previously discussed conventions about women involving sexual desire, those surrounding marriage have a direct influence on the rapes depicted in these texts. Each of the raped women is a party to marriage at the time of her violation.

That Shakespeare places the female characters in this common position is telling as to the relationship between the nature of marriage and the motivations in rape. Adherence to the feminine standards of early modern marriage proves to be an action influential in the relegation of each of these women to being objects of rape. One of the most relevant conventions of early modern marriage and its precursor, courtship, is the conflict in ownership of a woman's fate between her father and totality of suitors.

This conflict is identified by Claude Levi-Strauss in his culturally investigatory work, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. He recognizes that there are two kinds of social relationships through which a woman may engage a man. He writes, "She may, on the one hand, by a sister or a daughter, i.e. a woman given, or on the other, a wife, i.e. , a woman received" (138). In the traditions of early modern England, a woman spends the first portion of her life as the former until she transitions roles irrevocably through marriage. The relevance of this concern to rape lies in the tension that occurs through that transition of conceptual position for the woman; that both fathers and suitors have stake in the position of a woman inevitably creates a socially fluid arena wherein male competition takes place. Levi-Strauss also captures recognizes this inherent quality in marriage as it pertains to its traditional conceptions and deems marriage a perpetual triangle of interests and obligations.⁶ That the traditions of conceptualizing marriage prescribe a striving of sorts for males as well as a multiplicity of primary obligations for females creates an objective relationship between them in which feminine agency is displaced and masculine propriety is equated with unfaltering pursuit. Such relationships are exactly those that Shakespeare creates for the raped women of these texts. Each work

⁶ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 43-45.

displays a competitive relationship between men in regard to primary involvement with the desired women, and the implications of these relationships are directly involved in fashioning the terms of their respective rapes.

The triangular relationship of Lucrece's marriage is brought out in an exaggerated manner through the comparisons in the grief of Collatine and Lucretius following her death. Shakespeare concludes their initial lamentations with a fitting equation of their sorrow and a question as to its values; "Then son and father weep with equal strife who should weep most, for daughter or for wife" (1791-92). One effect of these lines is to draw attention to some sort of competitive motivation for the men in asserting the magnitude of their devastation in the face of Lucrece's suicide. Moreover, the amount of each man's grief is directly correlated to Lucrece's relevant position as it concerns their own individual world view. Shakespeare's question becomes one of which stage of the feminine lifespan is the greatest loss for patriarchal society. Although Lucrece's role as wife represents the realized feminine position in the early modern order, Lucretius appeals to his role in her generation as well as his paternal influence in her subsequent stewardship as reasoning to tip the scales of remorse in his favor. Indeed, the fulfillment of these duties on Lucretius' behalf is a necessary precursor for her marriage to Collatine in the first place. This logic is lost on Collatine as, rather than recognizing the fluidity of Lucrece's social position, he rebukes Lucretius' laments by demanding, "let no mourner say he weeps for her, for she was only mine, and only must be wailed by Collatine" (1798-99).

The competition between the pair, or the “emulation in their woe” as Brutus sees it, is merely the nature of action called for from these men under the conventions of early modern courtship and marriage. Passivity is a lauded attribute of any early modern daughter or wife and, coupled with the implicit social triangularities of those positions, makes clear the sexual division in approach called for by traditions. In her book *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England*, Laura Gowing recognizes that this division necessarily allocates all responsibility in sexual assertion to men thus relegating women to the correlating position of complete passivity.⁷ This axiom can be actively viewed in Collatine’s claims to sole ownership of Lucrece as well as residually in Lucretius’ concerns. It is clear that the Roman contingency as a whole endorses these sorts of patriarchal traditions which serves to encourage volatile social pursuit in men as well as crippling dependence and inaction in women; both are characteristics associable with direct concerns in Lucrece’s rape.

Tarquin embodies this male ideal when, upon decided to go through with his plan of rape, proclaims, “Affection is my captain, and he leadeth, and when his gaudy banner is displayed, the coward fights, and will not be dismayed” (271-273). The traditional social spectrum is completed by Lucrece’s passivity which she anthropomorphizes Tarquin’s actions as “sucked the honey which the chaste bee kept” (840). Her proclaimed responsibility is to simply retain rather than personally alter her position in marriage. Such attitudes are in keeping with conventions which makes the advent of rape much more likely as they are the same that exist in such a drastically objective relationship. Adherence to early modern marriage norms by these characters encourages relationships

⁷ Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth Century England*, 86

of objectified desire such as rape. In “The Rape of Lucrece”, the feminine resilience to this devastating act is reduced through the male competition that early modern marriage incites. Marriage has the same effect in *Titus Andronicus* but, rather than with two or three men, through a veritable food chain of male suitors.

As previously discussed, Lavinia is the epitome of conventional female worth and, as such, is the most often desired female within the play. She is even chosen for marriage by the emperor of Rome, Saturninus, but his stated reasoning in this choice does not, in fact, refer extensively to Lavinia’s admirable qualities and charms. Rather, he cites fulfillment of a debt to Titus by advancing the general honor of his family as motivation. This act refers to the services rendered by Titus in both war and Saturninus’ election, but it also references the value Lavinia has in establishing a strong family through marriage. Therefore, as Saturninus’ actions have precluded Titus from realizing any differing compensation for his daughter, they also necessarily draw attention to the social competition that exists for her. Levi-Strauss also makes note of this social construct in stating that compensation, which balances the matrimonial exchange, is representative of some equivalent value that has been seized along with the bride.⁸ The contention between Roman males for Lavinia only heightens from this point in the play as Bassianus, assisted by a contingent of the Andronci, asserts his claim in marital right to Lavinia through the justification of a pre-existing betrothal between them. Lavinia can only react in obedient turn to each male’s assertion of true ownership. As mentioned in the first section, her feminine passivity only permits acquiescence to male instruction, and so she is destined for marriage with the male who asserts his will with the most vigor; Bassianus by means

⁸ Levi Strauss, *The Elemental Structure of Kinship*, 63.

of his martial strength. She is subjected to the same social inequality to all men who vie to marry her including her rapists, Chiron and Demetrius. Indeed, Saturninus, as the shunned party, makes this connection himself when he forewarns Bassianus that, “Thou and thy faction shall repent this rape” (1.1.401).

In defending their intent for Lavinia’s love to Aaron, Chiron and Demetrius identify this very consideration of the convention of male competition for women as their cause for hope in achieving her in some capacity. Aaron deems their intentions to be dangerous and “degenerate” because they are so outside of the potential familial circles of Lavinia. Demetrius responds with, “Why makes thou it so strange? / She is a woman, therefore may be wooed; / She is a woman, therefore may be won; / She is Lavinia, therefore must be loved” (2.1.82-84). His conception of the workings of sexual interaction evokes notions of just how open the feminine is to male advances in the early modern period. Demetrius not only suggests that every man has potential in achieving every woman but also that Lavinia’s nature creates a male duty of sexual pursuit. Conventions about male possession concerning marriage in the early modern period are the very piece of evidence that, by their own admission, incites the gothic brothers in their plans of sexual abduction. Lavinia’s assent to these norms evidenced by her malleability in devotion confines her to a role of strict adherence to any male influence. Early modern social context encourage relationships similar in power and agency dynamics to those depicted in Lavinia’s rape. Shakespeare addresses similar considerations through Desdemona in *Othello*.

In this play, the most notable lines concerning the influence of male competition in marriage on the actual rape are spoken by Brabantio. He repeatedly calls attention to his own claim to Desdemona which persists until the time of her marriage; an occasion that Brabantio does not believe has yet legitimately occurred. Brabantio continuously utilizes language of possession and theft to refer to Othello's supposed marriage to his daughter. He also makes note of the potential, and in his mind, preferable, marriages that could have paired Desdemona with "the wealthy curled darlings of our nation" had she not already been claimed by this one (1.2.69). It is clear that one of Brabantio's strategies in delegitimizing Othello's claim to marriage is to set the parameters of competition for Desdemona and prove that, within them, Othello is not of high enough worth. However, even Brabantio recognizes that once Othello has been deemed proper in his methods of gaining Desdemona in marriage, no legal recourse exists for retaking possession of her personage.

This recognition is due to the fact that, through marriage, a wife is inescapably bound to the fate of her husband. This notion is captured in English common law under which marriage subsumes a woman's very identity.⁹ These sorts of finalities in the lineage of male possession of women are intended to remove the threat of other ambitious males in society. However, as Shakespeare has suggested in "The Rape of Lucrece" and *Titus Andronicus*, the social prerogative of aggressively vying for feminine possession is so engrained in the early modern male countenance that the notion of marriage only provides it with a means of measuring aptitude. Othello shows his endorsement in the unity of honor between husband and wife when he bemoans to Iago, "My name, that was

⁹ Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England*, 96.

a fresh / as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / as mine own face (3.3.391).

However, rather than marriage providing a sentiment of contentedness or achievement for Othello, it instead provides the justificatory grounds on which he acts to rape and destroy his wife. His actions are at the mercy of Iago, who chooses to manipulate Othello into believing that Desdemona has chosen one of his competitors, Cassio, as a lover. By Iago's utilization of considerations about male competition, Othello has come to believe in a violation on Lucrece's part against the tenants of marriage. Although he incites the prevention of further such violations upon murdering Desdemona, Othello's own loss of standing through his perceived besting on the field of sexual battle also plays a role in the dreadful adjudications he carries out. He reacts to Emilia's news that Cassio has not yet been slain by questioning, "Not Cassio killed? Then murder's out of tune, / and sweet revenge grows harsh" (5.2.124-125). Othello not only notes the lack of justice in Cassio's survival in the face of his supposed offences, but he also terms revenge as 'sweet' which connotes a deep and emotional personal interest in its execution for Othello. This sentiment, which no doubt had a hand in fueling Othello's rage before the rape, stems from the bitterly competitive traditions of Shakespeare's contemporary climate which, as it has in *Othello*, encourages men to have an acute conception of the value gained in entering into marriage.

These conventions also shape the nature Desdemona's mental faculties and her subsequent corporeal reaction in the face of her rape and its relevant motivating considerations. In keeping with the norms of the early modern woman, Desdemona is exceedingly passive when it comes to the majority of her interactions with male

characters. There is no surprise then, when she embodies these principles in her marriage with Othello. Indeed, conduct literature concerning marriage is wildly popular in Shakespeare's contemporary period and, as it is predominantly written by men who have vested interest in supporting the status quo, it generally prescribes a passivity and obedience much like that thought appropriate for women in most social situations.¹⁰ Unfortunately, Desdemona displays her belief in this ethic even in the face of Othello's tirade which culminates in her rape and murder.

Once he has made his intentions clear, Desdemona only entreats Othello to delay carrying out his charge rather than abandoning it altogether. She begs Othello to, "Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight" and when he does not relent, she reforms her request to, "But half an hour" (5.2.87, 89). It is almost as if Desdemona has accepted the decisions of Othello and her own doom without even making attempt at a vigorous defense. Although she is well aware of her own innocence, Desdemona finds no will within herself to resist the fate that he chooses for her. The deferential position she is expected to uphold within their marriage makes itself known, even now as she is being destroyed. Moreover, she has previously verbalized her belief to Emilia that no value is worth breaking the marital bond. Coupling this fact with the jealousy and anger she has seen within Othello, it is no wonder she offers no defense. It is as if acting in accord with marriage conventions dictates that she should actually be killed in this way if it is to Othello's desire. In the case of both Othello and Desdemona, the male competition and female objectification implied by the norms of the early modern marriage have pivotal roles in creating the personal terms of rape.

¹⁰ Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720*, 126

Another concern in early modern marriage that has bearing Shakespeare's depictions of rape in each of these works is that of its expectation and purpose of childbearing. This is one of the more practical purposes of socially lauding chastity, but rather than its conferring social value upon women, through marriage, it holds the value of unfettered procreation. Lucrece indirectly promises Collatine that "This bastard graft shall never come to growth. He shall not boast, who did thy stock pollute, that thou art doting father of his fruit" (1062-64). Although there is no way for Lucrece to know if Tarquin's actions resulted in her pregnancy, the potential alone is enough for her to deem suicide a duty.

Titus also invokes images of polluted children when he describes Lavinia's current state by, "Here stands the spring whom you have stained with mud" (5.2.169). His method of revenge also pays homage to the lost ability of Lavinia to produce legitimate children as it culminates in Chrion and Demetrius being digested by their mother as a perversion of birth. In *Othello*, Iago cites the corruption of family as one of the most pressing reason for Brabantio to involve himself in the marriage. He predicts to Brabantio that, "You'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for coussing and jennets for germans" (1.1.113-115). Brabantio has lofty expectations of the family that his daughter will eventually create, and Iago plays off this social norm as a way to force Brabantio to his accusations of rape. In all of these works, these concerns about the pollution of the reproductive pool arise in response to rape. This is no shock in this focus on birth as referring to rape as a monstrous or imperfect birth in the early

modern period was often blamed on mothers for their lust or transgression.¹¹ Addressing these contexts is an action that culminates in the suicide of Lucrece, the murder of Lavinia, and the ostracizing of Desdemona by Brabantio. Shakespeare's focus on the duty of mothers holds a reactive perspective wherein rape has destroyed the fundamental value for early modern women. The social pressures of marriage and reproduction further isolate the feminine value, as it has with chastity. Although this convention about childbearing does not have much direct influence in motivating rape in these texts, its inclusion gives insight into the social reactions wherein women are regarded as devalued after a rape. This restricts feminine agency after rape to the point where, to be in accord with social norms, only death or reclusion from community is a suitable position. In these works, Shakespeare's contemporary social order not only has a pivotal role to play in the heightened potential of rape for women, but also in their social destruction as an ongoing result.

The women involved in the rapes depicted in these texts are, in the sexual capacity, usually dismissed as being symbolic of the static position of women in Shakespeare's contemporary society. While this is true to some certain extent, there really is great value in considering the positions of these women as fully realized individuals. While all three of them suffer similar transgressions and pressures, they each also have their own individual social situations within the play. Only by grating each one of them a broad enough scope in reading is it possible to formulate any conception about the circumstances that condemn them to their respective fates.

¹¹ Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720*, 26-29.

Shakespeare incorporates a great deal of his contemporary social traditions in the formative influences on these female characters. Moreover, upon close examination, it becomes clear that the inclusion of these norms is necessary for Shakespeare so as to achieve the particular workings of rape desired. He transfers general considerations of the feminine position as desired object within traditional patriarchal society. Much of the pervasiveness in reality for this axiom is due to the ancient conception of gender divisions which, under the one sex system, have a particularly restrictive niche for women in early modern England. Inextricable from this, and every other feminine norm, is the social exaltation of chastity for women which isolates feminine value both for its holders and pursuers. Shakespeare brings these considerations to a fully realized state by depicting a politicization of rape in each work which delineates the feminine values that the public of each play holds. He also roundly addresses the issue of marriage which is so integral to the tangible realization of this political philosophy. As with these other contexts, its inclusion has the effect of both furthering the divide between the male norm and correlating feminine utility and increasing the likelihood of emotional and cerebral states for both sexes which contribute to the propensity for rape.

In undertaking this study, I hoped to find common ground of explanation and purpose for the depictions of rape that exist in these three separate Shakespearian works. This common ground materializes as the contemporary social context of Shakespeare as it refers to all matters of gender and of the sexual. It is no surprise that, as relevant to more modern ideals, the feminine position in early modern England is terribly stringent on the both the freedom of will for women and to the extent of action for them that may

be deemed proprietary. However, it is somewhat shocking to find these restrictive conditions culpable for such an offensive action as rape. Shakespeare depicts rapes in these works to the purpose of a bottleneck through which the tensions of socio-gender inequality of early modern England, when properly agitated, may implode in the form of an excessively destructive and detestable transgression which challenges the constitution of all persons involved. In these works, rape both mirrors the negative tensions of normal gender considerations while suggesting terribly drastic consequences for its adherence that are often lost on its proponents.

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